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Our Useless Spy in Warsaw

What Good was Kuklinski if We Ignored His Information?

By Michael Dobbs

PARIS—BURIED IN the voluminous archives that I collected as a reporter covering the rise and fall of the Solidarity movement in Poland is a news item that could serve as an object lesson on the failure to make use of timely intelligence. It is dated Sept. 30, 1981, or 10 weeks before Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski stunned the world with his military crackdown.

The nine-line report, distributed by the Solidarity news agency, quoted a member of the ruling Communist Party Politburo as saying that Jaruzelski had secretly formed a six-man Committee for National Salvation. A decision had been taken in principle to destroy Solidarity by force. Special army and police units were being trained to put down possible resistance—but the regime had decided to wait two months in expectation of an erosion in popular support for the first independent trade union ever recognized by a Communist country.

The news item turned out to be devastatingly accurate—but not a single western correspondent in Warsaw paid the slightest attention. It was only after Jaruzelski's declaration of martial law on Dec. 13, 1981, that we realized we had missed a sensational scoop.

I was reminded of this episode on a recent trip to Warsaw as I sat in the well-appointed office of the Polish government spokesman listening to an amazing tale about a Central Intelligence Agency mole on Jaruzelski's staff. The spokesman, Jerzy Urban, claimed the Reagan administration was given the blueprint for martial law a month before the crackdown, but failed to alert Solidarity. He named the U.S. agent as Col. Wladyslaw Kuklinski, describing him as a Polish officer responsible for drawing up the operational plan for crushing Solidarity.

The Kuklinski saga shows that even with the most emphatic warning—from a high-level Polish spy—the United States failed to anticipate martial law. Looking back, I think this failure reflected a widespread assumption that, to crush Solidarity, the Soviets would have to invade Poland. But a contributing cause may have been the Reagan admininistration's apparent inability to process effectively the intelligence it had gathered.

It is clear that Jaruzelski secretly was preparing for a final showdown with Solidarity at the very time when he was talking grandly about "national reconciliation." On Nov. 4, 1981, he held a much-trumpeted meeting with Lech Walesa, the Solidarity leader, and Archbishop Jozef Glemp, the head of Poland's Roman Catholic Church. By Urban's own admission, this tripartite summit coincided with a secret

1982. He is now based in Paris.

meeting to put the finishing touches on martial law, attended by Kuklinski among other officials.

Several possible explanations have been put forward by Polish experts in the west for the failure to publicize Kuklinski's information. A minority view holds that some members of the Reagan administration, particularly in the Department of Defense, were guided by a "worse is better" philosophy as far as Poland was concerned. An extreme version of this theory has been adopted by Urban who maintained that Washington welcomed the prospect of civil war in Poland.

A more likely explanation is old-fashioned bureaucratic bungling.

"For the espionage profession, secrets often become a goal in themselves," said an analyst familiar with the administration's thinking on Poland. The source, who asked not to be named, compared the CIA's handling of intelligence provided by Kuklinski with the American failure to take action to prevent the bombing of Pearl Harbour in World War II despite the interception of Japanese codes.

In recent telephone interviews, senior State Department officials responsible for monitoring developments in Poland in 1981 said they had been unaware of Kuklinski's existence.

"We received general information [of the approach of martial law] from various sources, but I don't recall anything specific," said Walter Stoessel, former Number Three man at the State Department. Added Lawrence Eagleburger, former undersecretary for political affairs: "What caught us by surprise was the degree to which the crisis could be handled from inside rather than outside."

As a journalist based in Warsaw in 1981, I can hardly blame the State Department for failing to analyze the situation correctly, particularly if it was not given all the available facts by the CIA. With hindsight, it is obvious that a military crackdown was on the way. At the time, however, everything seemed much more confused. Signs that Jaruzelski was preparing for a final showdown with Solidarity were counterbalanced by evidence suggesting that a compromise still was possible.

Incredible as it may seem, the information about the secret formation of a Council for National Salvation crossed my desk without my being aware of it. It was buried under a stack of Solidarity bulletins that I rarely had time to read in the excitement of events.

"There was no shortage of warnings about martial law," said Jerzy Milewski, a former Solidarity official who now heads the union's office in western Europe. "Our problem was that we were getting so much information that we did not take it seriously. We knew, for example, that lists of internees were being prepared since March 1981. Solidarity activists boasted about being on the list."

Western attitudes toward the Polish crisis were heavily influenced by the precedent of the "Prague spring" in 1968, when a bout of liberalization in neighboring Czechoslovakia ended with a Soviet invasion. The lesson drawn by U.S. policymakers was that, in order to stifle dissent in East Europe, the Soviets needed to send in the Red Army. Preventing such an invasion became the focus of American policy.

Declassified

The Reagan administration's warnings of possible Soviet intervention began in March 1981 when Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger used the phrase "invasion by osmosis" to describe a military buildup on Poland's borders. The threat failed to materialize.

By the fall of 1981, the situation had changed. An invasion was no longer in the cards. Jaruzelski had convinced the Soviets that an "internal solution" was possible and in their best interests. Raw intelligence data about martial law preparations was available in Washington. But, in a marked contrast to the way the successive information scares were handled, the information never was publicly acted upon.

In private, U.S. intelligence sources have said that a major reason for keeping quiet was that Kuklinski was unable to supply a precise date for the imposition of martial law. Without this vital element, it is argued, there was no way of using his information to warn Solidarity.

Even assuming that the CIA had its reasons for failing to publicize Kuklinski's warnings about martial law, several troubling mysteries remain. One is the logical deduction that, in order to know that martial law secrets were leaking to the United States, the Soviet Union must itself have had a very reliable source of information in Washington. A second is the failure to exploit Kuklinski—an unrivaled propaganda asset—after the crackdown, at a time when the administration was trying to persuade its European allies to take tough action against the Soviet Union.

Urban's motives for revealing the Kuklinski case are clearly suspect. Reagan's outspoken anticommunism has made him a hero in the eyes of many Poles—and the Polish government has every interest in undermining his reputation.

But the question raised by the episode remains: Did the United States make the most effective use of its intelligence assets during a major crisis in East-West relations?

Michael Dobbs covered Poland for The Washington Post from 1980 to